

Plymouth & Devonport Revisited - Naval Dockyards Society Tour 5-8 September 2014 (Coats, A., November 2014, *Dockyards* 20(2), pp. 3-9)

Sixteen people attended this tour, a mixture of NDS regulars/new faces and members of Mike Critchley's Warship World group. As always, we were given unique behind-the-scenes tours, and we acted as NDS ambassadors to the largely volunteer groups who gave us tours. In most cases our donations went to the organisations, while the guides gave their own time for free. The price was kept within David Baynes's survey limit. The weather was sunny and warm, so we could enjoy the wonderful views from the Hoe.

We were based at the attractive Grosvenor Hotel near Plymouth Hoe, reasonably priced and well-located for all our destinations. On Friday afternoon we walked to the Barbican to explore this historic harbour, which is once again thriving. At 7pm we met up for Fish Chips supper at Mitch Tonks's new Rockfish Restaurant which is highly recommended for its very attractive location, friendly staff, excellent food at reasonable prices and great local cider.

On Saturday 6th we travelled by coach to Devonport Naval Heritage Centre, where we were met by Bob Cook, in charge of Group Visits and Events. After a welcome cup of coffee we were shown a large scale wall-mounted model of Devonport Dockyard and were given a brief history by Keith Johnson, Coordinator of the Heritage Centre Volunteers, whose stamina on the day was greatly admired. Our walking tour of Plymouth Naval Base Museum began with the figureheads, now rather confined in the former Fire Station (1851), near Fore Gate. The star was King Billy, William IV, who as Duke of Clarence was Lord High Admiral 1827–8, thereby responsible for Royal William Victualling Yard, and then reigned 1830–7. He was the original figurehead on *Royal William*, 120 guns (1833), built at Pembroke Dock and converted to steam in 1860. He had been displayed at the easternmost point of South Yard, next to Mutton Cove, but was brought inside for refurbishment. A fibreglass copy now stands in its place. He was not mentioned by David Pulvertaft, presumably because he was refurbished following David's authoritative study. David described Devonport's, and other, naval figureheads which remain or have been lost or scattered, regretting their dispersal.

The stables section of the Fire Station housed a diverse Royal Navy display, including a model of Drake's fleet, photographs and *Holland I's* huge battery. *À propos* dockyard horses, one visitor

recalled as a small boy in Devonport (late 1940s) seeing a string of horses mornings and evenings which I was told were going to/from their stables somewhere in Stoke (up the hill from us) to the Dockyard, where they pulled wagons. I do not remember them later (say 1950s). It was an era of petrol rationing and I do recall our milk and bread deliveries by horse drawn vehicles in the same period (1940s).

We then visited the Pay Office (c.1780), admiring the vaulted and fireproofed ground floor ceiling, the elegant staircase, decorative covings, mantelpieces and doorways. We viewed a large model of Royal William Yard and displays of food, drink and clothing. We also viewed exhibits inside Gilroy House (the former Police Superintendent's House) and some stonework fragments from St Lo's Church:

Situated just inside of the old Fore Street Gate, the Royal dockyard Chapel was the second oldest Church of England place of worship in the Town of Devonport. It was damaged in the Blitz and demolished. The dockyard Chapel was founded in 1700, just a short time after the commencement of the Royal dockyard, and bore an inscription that it was built ~ by the generous and pious contributions of officers and seamen belonging to a squadron of men-of-war paid off in this yard (after 10 years expensive war with France); being propagated and carried on by the energy and religious endeavours of George St Leo, Esquire, commissioner of the said yard, and comptroller of the said pay. ~ It was forever after known as St Loe's (sic) Church. The Chapel had deteriorated so much that in September 1814 the order was given to have it demolished....in the meantime services had been transferred to the Ropehouses in South Yard. The foundation stone of the new Chapel was laid without ceremony on Thursday January 19th 1815 and was finally opened on November 9th 1817. The dockyard Chapel was damaged in April 1941 during the Blitz on Devonport and the remains were demolished. (Plymouth City Council Archives, Reference 2021)

After a lunch of oggies we split into two groups, one seeing the nuclear submarine HMS *Courageous* and the other being given a select site tour and illustrated talks: 'Widows of the Ropery' and part of 'Crime and Punishment in 18th & 19th century Plymouth', or as one visitor put it: experiencing the 'finer points of hanging and the guillotine'. Our *Courageous* guide had served on the boat in the 1980s, so could add more than a mere description, which was itself enthralling. We saw how the 120-strong crew slept in sometimes very cold conditions, alongside the Tigerfish torpedoes and potatoes (plus, after 10 weeks at sea, potato flies). Catering was very important to the morale of the crew, a meal being served every 6 hours to support the shifts, Saturdays marked as steak night, achieved on £1.78 a day per man.

Finally we boarded our coach for the dockyard tour, Keith giving the commentary as we saw in South Yard the Ropery, Slip No. 3, where the Dreadnoughts were constructed in the early C20, the oldest covered Slip No. 1, the Scribe Board, the Saw Mills and Blacksmith's Shop (in a poor state of repair). In front of the remnant of the Officers' Terrace we saw Dummer's Dry Dock and Wet Basin, long missing the linking gates. West of this is the Victorian Dry Dock Pump House and Dry Dock No. 4 which was the biggest in the world when opened by George III. Then we crossed the bridge linking South Yard to Morice Ordnance Yard, overlooking an old part of Devonport and the approach to the Torpoint Ferry, originally Tar Point: to careen and re-tar wooden hulls. At Morice Yard the magnificent limestone storehouses, magazine and officers' terrace were built from stone quarried on site, levelled to construct the Ordnance wharf. In North Yard we passed the 1970s Frigate Sheds, the Factory and the Nuclear Refuelling Complex, the Brutalist Naafi Building and the new Weston Mill wharves. Lastly we viewed the majestic naval barracks of HMS *Drake*, including the latest building for Haslar Company, a rehabilitation centre for disabled personnel, and the Barracks' own railway station. The railway line also linked North and South Yards by a tunnel, which when dug, revealed graves, thought possibly to date from the C17 Civil War siege, as that area was the escarpment of the outer defences. Some air raid shelters beneath the tunnel could survive.

On Sunday 7th while on the ferry from the Barbican to Royal William Yard we were very fortunate to have a commentary from our tour guide, Nigel Overton, Curator (City & Maritime Heritage), Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery, relating the rôle of the historic Cattewater in C16 naval history. We viewed one of its remaining victualling stores, now a white pub by a slip, Mount Batten tower, built by Captain William Batten during the Civil War, the Royal Plymouth Corinthian Yacht Club which contains the Citadel's sea basin and St Nicholas's Island which held royalist prisoners after the Civil War, and the fort in Mount Edgcombe across the Tamar. It was superb to pass the Horsley swing bridge (1833) into the harbour of the victualling yard, built by Sir John Rennie (1794–1874), who also built the Plymouth breakwater.

Nigel began his tour at the grand land gateway crowned by a statue of William IV, who, as the Duke of Clarence, commissioned the 14 acre yard with 1,500 feet of quayside. He described its transformation from its original 1834 configuration, through later uses, to present day refurbishment as residences, restaurants and shops. We saw the Slaughterhouse, the Bakery, two officers' houses built of granite and the Brewery which was barely used for this purpose as the beer ration ended in 1831; from 1929 it was used as a torpedo works and store. Drum Avenue was covered over during the Crimean War to provide extra storage. The new Cooperage was built in 1899 of granite. Although a popular market was in progress, we could still gain a feel for the grandeur and substance of Rennie's magnificent buildings, built of granite and veined Plymouth limestone, quarried from the site. It was certainly a change from our last visit in May 2003 when the site was virtually empty of people. Melville, used as a sugar mill and chocolate store, is due to be restored as a hotel. We also went through the tunnel to Firestone Bay facing Plymouth, which would have provided an alternative sea access in adverse weather. Nigel showed us historic maps of the Plymouth and Devonport waterfronts dated 1539, 1825, 1848 and 1895.

As an optional extra instead of lunch, Nigel took some of us on a walk around Western King Point, climbing the new 40ft flight of steps, criticised for piercing the retaining wall and spoiling the setting of Clarence Steps. The walk included the Henrician blockhouses and the restored Turncock's cottage next to the former reservoir, closed in 1960. The foreshore and cliffs also form a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), exposing a complex series of grey and pink Devonian limestones.

After lunch (for some) we enjoyed a relaxed tour of Marine Barracks, Durnford St, Stonehouse, with Administrator Richard Fisher, enhanced by his collection of illustrations. After passing the elegant houses in Durnford Street, dating from the 1830s and rented out by the Edgcombe family, we entered the Barracks gateway into the large Parade Ground. The first privates' accommodation blocks, facing the gateway, and officers' barracks either side were built 1779–1785. The Admiralty decided it would be better for discipline, training and accessibility to have the marines in one place, ready to embark when required, rather than having to round them up from Plymouth. Outside the 'dry' Barracks sprang up pubs and brothels. In the 1860s the Barracks were enlarged to hold families, a school, a chapel and a beer room. In the early days men were punished by being whipped in the Parade Ground or had to rake and roll the crushed limestone surface, then clean their uniforms for the next day. The Victorians imprisoned or fined the men instead. During the 1797

naval mutiny four men were overheard plotting to takeover arms and were taken to the Citadel. They had to carry their coffins from there to the Hoe, where 2,500 people turned out to see them shot. We were enthralled by the Chapel, the 1831 Globe Theatre, built by subscription (within the shell of the C18 Raquet Court), said to have been modelled on London's Crichton Theatre which has hosted many famous actors. The tour ended in the Officer's Mess built in 1858 (to mimic the nearby Longroom ballroom, built for the Edgumbes in 1756 by Sir Robert Taylor) with its fabulous collection of original portraits.

Finally, on Monday 8th we met Blue Badge Tour Guide Jane Dymock at the Royal Citadel. She recounted that Drake's artillery fort on the east of the Hoe had overlooked the mouth of the Cattewater. During the second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-7) Charles II sent engineer Bernard de Gomme (1620-85) to survey Plymouth's defences. He designed a five-bastioned fort in a style that the French engineer Vauban (1633-1707) would employ to greater extent on France's land borders. It was built 1675-85 to include the earlier fort as a sixth bastion, plus a demi-bastion. Sir Thomas Fitch/Fitz, an associate of Sir Christopher Wren, designed the magnificent Portland stone 1670 baroque gateway which includes a statue of Charles II as a Roman general, the royal coat of arms and the coat of arms of John Gra/enville, 1st Earl of Bath (1628-1701), a close supporter of Charles II during the Civil Wars who became governor of Plymouth 1661-96, Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall 1660-96, of Devon 1688/9-96, and a powerful West Country landowner.

We walked around the curtain wall and bastions, gaining wonderful views of Plymouth, the Harbour and the Sound. Chimneys pierced the ramparts from the rooms below. Cannon were aimed at the town and harbour, to protect from a land attack, and potentially unfriendly locals (Plymouth being Parliamentary during the Civil War). We also saw a rusty gun (it costs £30K to restore a 32lb gun). Drake's fort had enclosed a chapel used by fishermen and seamen. St Katherine's Chapel on the Hoe 1667-1688 was built on the site of C14 chapel, enlarged and partly rebuilt. In 1845 it was further enlarged in an Early Gothic style as soldiers were given more training, acquiring two galleries with wrought-iron balustrades, two side aisles to give it cruciform plan., a plastered ceiling and the doors; in the late C19 fittings including an octagonal pulpit were added.

On the Parade Ground is a full-length lead statue of George II, the last monarch to command the army in battle, in the costume of a Roman emperor, erected by Robert Pitt in 1728 and donated by Louis Dufour who commanded a company of Invalids or retired soldiers. Gun trophies from Waterloo and the Crimean War include the Alma Gun. The Citadel was refurbished during the 1890s-1900s by the architect T. Kinsel Rogers.

Some comments from those on the trip:

The guides on Saturday and Richard Fisher at the RM Barracks were particularly good.

Every aspect was so interesting and the speakers/guides were the best - that is they spoke clearly, knew their subject, were informative - laced with that touch of humour which engages.

The hotel was well located, was reasonably priced and had good facilities. Everything went very smoothly; the tours you arranged taking us to places we would not have got to on our own, and with the benefit of very knowledgeable guides.

This was my first dockyard visit, other than through Navy Days, and it was a thoroughly enjoyable, well-organised experience over several days. The hotel was pleasant and each event I found fascinating. The guides were knowledgeable and quite likeable. It was most enjoyable meeting new, like-minded people. Looking forward to the next one.

The quality of our visit was very much enhanced by the close liaison between Bob Cook, Nigel Overton and Richard Fisher, who made every effort to ensure that we enjoyed the best possible experience. NDS is very grateful to all the guides, and to David Baynes, NDS Tour Organiser.

The end of South Yard as a naval entity

Bob Cook had alerted NDS to the news that 'Devonport's unique naval museum could be moved into the heart of Plymouth as part of plans to create a £21million History Centre.' Commodore Graham Little, the Devonport Naval Base Commander, supports the move (*Plymouth Herald*, 11 May 2014). In May 2014 Plymouth City Council was awarded £12.5million from HLF to refurbish and extend the City Library and Museum and Art Gallery (*Plymouth Herald*, May 27, 2014). However, there is no guarantee that the proposed City Museum development will be large enough to embrace the complete collection.

This future removal of Plymouth Naval Base Museum will end public access entirely from South Yard; historic buildings are already surrounded by intrusive wire fencing and vistas impeded by the large Princess Yachts shipsheds. It may be surmised that this is not unlinked to further moves to remove South Yard altogether from the naval estate. A City Deal (Plymouth and the South West Peninsula City Deal) threatens further the vulnerable historic structures of South Yard, where North and South Smitheries and the Sawmills are on the English Heritage Buildings at Risk Register and South Yard is not currently included in a Conservation Area nor covered by a Conservation Management Plan. In January 2014 a Plymouth City Deal sought 'to unlock land at South Yard in Devonport Naval Base.' (*Marine News*, 20 January 2014). More recently, in June 2014 it was announced that:

The Plymouth office of engineering, construction and technical services business URS will work with a group of sub-consultants including LHC Architects, property consultancy Alder King and construction consultancy Ward Williams Associates on the scheme. They will soon begin in-depth site investigations as a first step towards coming up with detailed proposals for the release of the South Yard site at Devonport Naval Base and its conversion into a new marine industries hub. (Insider Media Ltd, 19 June 2014)

This may well be the last time the NDS visits Devonport South Yard.

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Further information

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'Plymouth Dock – Yard' DVD, includes a bonus DVD on 'Devonport Past and Present', price £12.99 + postage and package of £1.50 via rayandmary@talktalk.net. All proceeds to Plymouth Naval Base Museum

Plymouth Herald (11 May 2014). Naval heritage centre set for city centre move as part of £21m history development, <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/Naval-heritage-centre-set-city-centre-21m-history/story-21084145-detail/story.html>

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Addendum by Dr Celia Clark

Keith Johnson of the Devonport Naval Heritage Centre museum gave a moving lecture, 'The Widows of the Ropery', about the employment of women in the Ropery, which began in the late nineteenth century. A photograph dated 1891 of twelve widows and their daughters, 'The Widows of The Ropery', in the collection is evidence of long standing employment of women as rope-making-machine minders for the steam-powered machinery driven from overhead line shafts. To qualify, they had either to be widows of sailors, marines or dock-yardmen – for whom there were as yet no pension arrangements – or their daughters. The collection also includes letters from widows asking for dockyard employment. The woman with three stripes on her uniform is the matron and the one with two stripes her deputy. Another photograph shows that some were mere girls of twelve or fourteen, working with noisy machines for six days a week. Research by Keith Johnson in the census and burial records has identified several individuals with ages ranging from fifty-four to twenty-two. Charlotte Sullivan aged fifty-four, who lived nearby in Stoke Damerall, was described in the 1891 census as 'Matron (Ropery) Dockyard', and Jessie Merrett

aged forty-four as 'Hemp Spinner HM Ropery'. Most of these women lived close to their work, and although some lived to eighty or ninety, some were buried in the cheapest graves: 'Common Grass' (Ford Park Cemetery Trust <http://www.ford-park-cemetery.org> Grave Notes for Plot: GLB 21 7).

A guide to Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport published in 1914 describes the Ropery: 'where practically all the ropes used in the Navy are made, for the output at the Chatham ropery, the only other Government establishment of the kind, is very small. A special order is required to enter this building, where the making of rope can be watched from the time when the flax is sorted and passed through the spinning jennies, tended by women, until it reaches the department where it is made into great ropes, all with the thin red twine, the Government trade mark, running through them.'